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National Endowment for the Humanities Level I Start-up Grant White Paper
Less-Networked Speaker Communities and Digital Language Archives.

Submitted by Lise M. Dobrin, PI

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The goal of this project was to bring together linguists, archivists, and community representatives to discuss concrete options for connecting “less-networked” speaker communities with the digital language archives that house their linguistic and cultural materials. Language documentation and archiving are proceeding at an accelerated pace at present, as language shift occurs throughout the world and we all become more cognizant of this threat to knowledge of human capacities and history. Like museums and similar institutions that work to preserve language, folklore, and other forms of intangible heritage, language archives have become increasingly sensitive to the needs and interests of the native communities that are the source of their collections, and they are doing their best to ensure that source communities have access to the language materials they produce. But it can be less clear how to integrate speaker communities into the ongoing process of digital archive curation. Such involvement is attractive because it has the potential to transform language archives into sites for ongoing dialogue and exchange with living communities, increasing the value of the archived items for all.

The workshop I organized to address this issue took place on Monday March 26th and Tuesday March 27th, 2012 at the University of Virginia. Key participants included:

Lise Dobrin	PI, Anthropology, University of Virginia Director, Arapesh Grammar and Digital Language Archive
Daniel Pitti	Co-director, IATH, University of Virginia
Worthy Martin	Co-director, IATH University of Virginia
Ellen Contini-Morava	Anthropology, University of Virginia
Eve Danziger	Anthropology, University of Virginia
David Germano	Director, Tibetan Himalayan Library
Edward Garrett	Programmer, Pinedrop
Travis McCauley	Programmer, Pinedrop
Pius Tamanji	Linguistics, University of Yaoundi
Jeff Good	Linguistics, University of Buffalo
David Nathan	Director, Endangered Languages Archive
Emmanuel Narokobi	Director, Masalai Communications, Papua New Guinea
Rose Shuman	Founder, Open Mind - Question Box

The last three individuals participated via Skype, with an intense 10-day long visit from Narokobi a few weeks following the workshop. The original intention of the workshop was to discuss possible technological solutions to the problem of engaging with communities that have limited IT resources as a result of the situations and settings where many source communities are located. As we discussed the problem, it became clear that it was both more and less pressing than we had originally envisioned. It was less pressing in that technology continues to spread so that it will not be long before the ‘less networked’ communities of today will have access to many resources we take for granted—cell phone access, internet, and so on. But it is more pressing even so, because those technologies will be embedded in people’s lives in locally particular ways.

Various technical proposals were considered for the case study regions, which were rural northwest Cameroon and Papua New Guinea. For example we discussed an adaptation of the “Question Box” model developed by the California nonprofit Open Mind (questionbox.org). Question Box is essentially a live telephone hotline system that connects people off the grid to a live operator using SMS and solar technologies. We were interested in Question Box because it bypasses literacy and technology barriers. We also considered a proposal by a member of the Arapesh diaspora community in Papua New Guinea, Emmanuel Narokobi, who is eager to connect himself and his town relatives to the Arapesh Grammar and Digital Language Archive through a mobile text and voice recording system of his design.

The problem as originally framed was one of access to information, a problem that should in principle lend itself to a technological solution. But the themes we ended up addressing in the discussion were somewhat different from what was originally envisioned; they were focused much more on the social than the technical dimensions of the problem. The centered on

- the limits of various technologies, especially those locally available in Cameroon and Papua New Guinea
- the particular interests of various subgroups of local people at both sites
- the need to reconceptualize the binary “first world” archive/“rural remote” source community opposition we had been presupposing as something more akin to a triangle in which the urban diaspora constitutes a critical third term
- the need to establish the true utility and social appropriateness of any interventions intended to increase communication among these groups

Reframing ‘less-networked communities’ as a social rather than technical problem led us to conclude that there are two important and interrelated areas of social complexity that archives working with less networked speaker communities must pay special attention to if they are to integrate these communities into the archiving process.

1. We have to have a realistic sense of how technology is used locally, lest we project false hopes for how it could be used, or too blithely flatter a community's hopes for how it could solve their problems. For example, Papua New Guineans have been great adopters of social media. However, this is not because they have computers or smart phones but because they have specially enabled facebook phones distributed by Digicel. Indeed, in Papua New Guinea many people now have cell phones, and there is coverage over 80% of the country. But people who have certain technologies may still use them in locally particular ways. Papua New Guineans who own cell phones may go long periods without phone access, or use their phones only between Friday and Sunday, on the same schedule they follow in buying store food and alcohol: when they have cash after getting paid, because they are organized on prepaid plans. People give and receive minutes as small gifts in the same way they do cigarettes and betel nut. There are also gender disparities, with women more apt to have their phone broken or destroyed by jealous boyfriends or husbands. In discussing how cell technology could assist in connecting Papua New Guinean town dwellers to a digital language archive so they could take advantage of the language resources housed there, it was not the technical challenges but managing the social issue of technology use that gave us pause. We were led to appreciate the advantages of a fixed-site system like the Question Box discussed above, since the technology is harder to break, lose, misuse, or steal. In discussing the needs of the rural Cameroonian community we concluded that older technologies like radio broadcasting probably made more sense for content delivery because listening to the radio is already integrated into people daily routines, and has certain attractive features from the point of view of language learning, like keeping the language always embedded in natural oral interaction as opposed to isolating and freezing it in sample texts and formal pedagogical materials. Connecting less-networked speakers with materials held in digital language archives will thus require many particular approaches, rather than a single generalized approach.

2. It is almost a truism in linguistics at present that it can be hard to determine who actually comprises the relevant source community. This is a question that usually comes up when trying to determine issues of right and access to language materials. But in the case of less networked communities there are certain social distinctions that seem to recur, and one of these is between the individuals and groups living in a rural setting (back in the village, off the grid, etc.), and diaspora communities living in more urban environments. The dichotomy is of course an idealization, but it does seem to correspond roughly to very different syndromes of capabilities and needs. Villagers may retain more traditional knowledge and so be able to provide further data and benefit from archival materials in certain ways, such as from distributed print materials or school resources, while the diaspora community may be better able to benefit from digital access to archives. But this also means we have to be careful in developing project outlines and establishing rights to materials, because although archivists' contact with a community through its diaspora members, this group does not necessarily speak for the other. We saw this perhaps most clearly in the case of the Loba community of Nepal which we discussed at the workshop, in which an ethnomusical documentation project sponsored by the Loba diaspora community in New York ended up having negative repercussions for

the functioning and continuity of the ritual hierarchy back home. This has also been an issue in directing the Arapesh archive: the most active and involved stakeholders in the diaspora community may know little about the meaning of the archived materials, and so may not fully appreciate what is at stake in their distribution. The archive is in a special position to mediate between these groups.

When considered from a social point of view, the digital archive is not only a safe repository for information that people value, but a vehicle for relationships—a node in a social network—that has the potential to provide support for endangered language communities. The challenge is to use that special position wisely, in a socially as well as a technically informed way. There are currently no plans to pursue further funding to develop a generalized technical solution to the problem of rural community archive access. However, the problem of less-networked speakers has been helpfully clarified and the new relationships formed as a result of the workshop between the PI and members of the Arapesh urban diaspora community have been extremely productive. With our own funds Dobrin and IATH have begun collaborating with Narokobi to develop a community-oriented digital interface for a set of archival materials focused on Arapesh kinship. We have also begun discussing ways of mobilizing other archived materials to serve community interests, including a set of photographs taken by the anthropologist Reo Fortune in Arapesh country in the 1930s, and a written ‘charter’ narrative of the community’s history from mythical times through the present that was produced by an important local leader before he died in 2010. A trip by Dobrin to Papua New Guinea sponsored by IATH will afford the opportunity to explore these in conversation with Arapesh people both in town and in the village.

The following are some news reports and radio shows that aired following the workshop:

UVa News Story reporting on the workshop and the Arapesh Grammar and Digital Language Archive:

<http://news.virginia.edu/content/giving-endangered-language-back-its-people>

Interview with Dobrin on Radio Australia’s Pacific Beat program:

<http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/onairhighlights/us-linguist-trying-to-save-pngs-arapesh-language>

Interview with Narokobi in PNG’s local lingua franca Tok Pisin also aired on Pacific Beat:

<http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/tokpisin/radio/onairhighlights/teknoloji-i-halvim-long-lukautim-tok-ples/840218>

Interview broadcast on WTJU, Charlottesville’s local radio station:

http://cvillemorrow.typepad.com/charlottesville_tomorrow_/2012/04/soundboard-1.html

Report on the results of the workshop at the International Digital Humanities Conference
in Hamburg, Germany:

<http://lecture2go.uni-hamburg.de/konferenzen/-/k/13993>